

EPISTLE

FROM THE

MINISTERS and MESSENGERS,

Assembled at *Kettering*, May 19 and 20, 1767.

To the several Baptized Churches represented by them:
meeting at *Sheepshead, Armsby, Foxton, Kettering,*
Walgrave, Olney, Northampton, and Calton.

Dearly beloved in the Lord,

THIS our annual interview, through a divine blessing, has been very comfortable and edifying; love and unity has abounded amongst us. We received your accounts of the state of religion in the several churches, and as members of the same body, in love and sympathy towards you, feel both your sorrows and joys; so that you have shared in our most fervent and united prayers for your peace, comfort, and prosperity; and our solemn praise and thanksgivings unto God have abounded for the mercies you have enjoyed from him. Willing you should reap some more fruit from this association, we close it not without an Epistle to you.

Wishing grace, mercy, and peace, may be multiplied unto you, from God our Father, and Christ Jesus our Lord. Beloved, As ye are our joy, and crown, so we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. To write things which ye know, to us is not grievous, but for you it is safe. We think it meet to stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance; to consider, that as distinct visible churches of Christ, you are followers of the churches of God in Judea, being formed on the same primitive Christian plan, whose members consisted only of such as professed repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ; thus your constitution is not human, but divine; not founded on human assemblies, or councils, whether of presbyters or prelates, of nobles or princes, cardinals or popes, which are all fallible; but on the infallible rule of God's word. Be careful to preserve it by admitting none into your communion; but such

as you have reason to believe have a right to a name and a place in God's house; for those who have not, if you receive them, will be pricks in your eyes, and thorns in your sides, that will vex you, and embrace the first opportunity to destroy your divine constitution, and reduce you to a meer natural and civil society, who will chuse their own blind reason for their guide, and content themselves with a few dry lectures on morality, and but very little of the practice of it; somewhat of a form of godliness, without the power; from such turn away.

Our national establishment in their 19th article, which is subscribed to by all the clergy, agreeably describes a visible church of Christ, as "a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered, according to Christ's ordinance in all things that of necessity are requisite to the same." Yet what a superstitious regard remains for particular places of worship? how many are crying out, The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these? So grossly ignorant are many, that they think if they forsake those places, they would be guilty of the heinous sin of schism from the Christian church. But ye, beloved, have not so learned Christ, knowing that the Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands. That the place or building though ever so grand and magnificent is nothing to God; but that in all places, though ever so mean and contemptible in the eyes of men, where he records his name, he will come and bless his people, and wheresoever only two or three of them are gathered in his name; Christ says, There am I in the midst of them. As God, under this gospel dispensation, hath not chosen any particular place or building to fix his name there, and dwell in, so his true spiritual worshippers should have no veneration for one place more than another. Neither the mountain of Samaria, nor the temple of Jerusalem, nor any other building, but they should chuse to meet in such places where God is worshipped in spirit and in truth; where the doctrine preached, the worship, ordinances, and discipline attended to, and the officers and communicants are such as are most agreeable to the mind of Christ, as revealed in his word. Where incense is offered unto the Lord, and a pure offering, by a congregation of faithful men, there may we expect to enjoy the Lord's presence, to see his power and glory, and to be fed with the fatness of his house.

Again, Consider, beloved, That your real belief in, profession of, and zealous attachment to the sublime doctrines of Christianity, are your glory; and as your *edification*, comfort, establishment and per-



perfection, much depend thereon, may you abound therein more and more. We, as ministers of Christ, are raised up, and set for the defence of the gospel, and should be valiant for the truth on the earth. The Lord has also founded you as his churches, and raised you up as pillars, to hold forth, bear witness to, maintain, support, and diffuse the knowledge of the truth in the world: Ye are his golden candlesticks, that are to give light in it; and as a city set on a hill, cannot be hid, so the churches of Christ should openly distinguish themselves, and shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of truth. Every revealed truth in the sacred oracles should be precious to you, and not sold at any rate; but take heed, lest you be deceived with errors gilded over with some truth; for as all is not gold that glitters, so all is not truth that is so called; you have a sure word of prophecy, and you will do well to take heed unto it, as an infallible touchstone to try counterfeits. The dreadful depravity, and gross darkness of the human mind, about itself, a Deity, his law, and eternity, through man's apostacy from God, are manifest, by the absurd conceptions, and shocking idolatrous practices, of such nations that are without a divine revelation. But alas! it abundantly more discovers itself in such, who enjoy a divine revelation, and yet stumble at it, and treat those important doctrines it reveals, which reason never could have informed us of, with the utmost contempt. Bless God, that Christ is not a stone of stumbling, and rock of offence to you; that he has given you a spiritual discerning of the truth, and a taste of its sweetness and power; so that gospel doctrines are the food of your souls, you live on them, and are animated by them, to live unto God through the spirit: Hold them fast, and be not ashamed to profess them, such as, The glorious doctrine of the Trinity, and so of the proper Deity and Equality of the Son, and Spirit, with the divine Father, Three in one God.

The doctrine of the Father's sovereign, free, and eternal love, in his actually and personally choosing, blessing, and adopting of his people in his Son, and giving them to him, as his Mystical Body, and Bride, before the foundation of the world.

The doctrine of the Son's amazing grace and condescension, in his actual acceptance of, espousals to, and engagements for the people of his Father's choice and love; as their Head, Husband, and Surety, before the world began; and pursuant thereunto, in the fullness of time, in his performing his engagements for them, by being made of a woman, made under the law, suffering, and dying the shameful death of the cross, in order to expiate their sin and guilt,
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and that he might openly own them as his Bride, and glorify her with himself.

And the doctrine of the Holy Ghost's efficacious, and distinguishing grace; in their regeneration, conversion, edification, establishment, and perseverance in grace, unto eternal glory.

These foundation doctrines, with others included in our most holy faith, contend earnestly for; not as meer speculative notions in your heads, but as the spring of all vital religion and godliness; and know assuredly, that so far as any church departs from the truth, it may be said of it, The glory is departed.

The notions of universal grace, and a conditional covenant, are the devices of men, in opposition to the sovereignty of God, in the dispensations of his grace; his foreknowledge, and wisdom, in the grand affair of his people's salvation; his eternal purposes that he hath purposed in himself; his absolute covenant which is well ordered in all things and sure, and contains all the salvation of his people, and all their desire; his promises, which are all yea and amen in Christ, and sure to all the seed. In short, such a conditional scheme tends to represent the divine Father as unjust, and cruel towards his own Son, in laying the iniquities of many on him, and in bruising and putting him to grief, and making his soul an offering for their sins, when he foreknew that they would not reap any benefit thereby. It highly dishonours the Son of God, by rendering his sufferings and death fruitless and vain, not as having obtained salvation for any one soul, but only an offer of it; and the right to it to depend on the human will, and works of faith, repentance, and sincere obedience to the last moment of life. It also sets aside the necessity of the Spirit's operations on the hearts of men, and makes man, vain man, the principal with regard to the salvation of his own soul; as it all depends on his own will and works, and not on the grace of the Eternal Three, which this scheme represents as ineffectual for the salvation of any one soul. But ye, beloved, experimentally know, that your wills are naturally enslaved to sin and satan; that you are also without strength; that of an unwilling people ye were made willing in the day of Christ's power, and not your own; that when dead in trespasses and sins, his spirit quickened you, opened your blind eyes, convinced you of your sins, and of the necessity of a better righteousness than your own; wrought faith in you, and led you to the Saviour, and enabled you to rely on his blood and righteousness for pardon and justification, and to love the Lord and walk in his ways; and in all his operations, acted as a sovereign, free, but efficacious agent,

agent. So that you cannot but look on your faith, repentance, and love to Christ from whence your sincere obedience doth flow, as spiritual blessings of the covenant of grace, wrought in you by the Spirit on the foundation of the Father's choice, and the Son's redemption of you, and not as conditions of the covenant on your part. Such a conditional scheme is a perversion of the gospel of Christ, so bear your testimony against it, and stand fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the gospel.

Again, It is your glory, and we doubt not but you esteem it your happiness, that the Lord Jesus, the great head of the church, is giving you Pastors and Teachers, who are also, in the sacred oracles, called Elders, Bishops, Overseers, Shepherds, Guides, &c. whose work is to teach, feed, take the oversight of, and guide you by the word; and duly administer his ordinances to you; officers of your own choice, and not imposed on you; such who have learned Christ, whom he hath put into the ministry; and to whom he hath given the tongue of the learned, that they might know how to speak a word in season to the weary. Esteem them highly in love for their works sake. Help them by your prayers, and follow them so far, and no farther, than they follow Christ, who is the only head over all things to his church; and you justly esteem him also, as the only Arch, Chief, or Lord Bishop there, who has deservedly the preheminance in all things. To you there is but one ecclesiastical Lord, even Christ, who is Lord of all, nor would he have any lord it over God's heritage; nor should there be any of Diotrephes's spirit amongst you, who love to have the preheminance.

Agreeable to the primitive church's, you also have your Deacons, whose office is honourable, and useful in serving tables. These are the ordinary officers, and orders of men, Christ has appointed in his churches, nor can you esteem any other of divine appointment there.

Further, Be upon your honour, as sincere followers of Christ, so as to esteem and regard his word, as your only rubric, ritual, liturgy, or service book; which contains a compleat body of ecclesiastic laws, and ordinances which Christians are bound in conscience to observe. The Lord Jesus has not enjoined any forms of prayer for divine worship, not even what is called the Lord's Prayer, which he only gave as a directory for prayer, and not to be used as a form; so he says, *After this manner therefore pray ye.* That forms composed, and imposed by men for the worship of God, not only want divine authority to make them lawful, but are also hindrances instead of helps to that spiritual and true worship, which God requires of his people.

people. Nor can any compose forms suited to all the cases of God's people, and the use of them renders the promised help of the spirit of grace and supplication needless. Nor do any shew their love to the Lord Jesus, by their zealous attachment to forms and modes of worship, which he has not appointed. Those to whom Christ gives ministerial gifts, that they may be apt to teach, by speaking as from God to his people, no doubt but he makes them also apt to speak unto God for them. Where there is no gift for prayer, we cannot expect gifts for preaching. And for able ministers of Christ, to use forms of prayer, or to read their sermons, is like an able man using of crutches. A bad custom too much prevailing in our day, that encourages the lame, and the lazy, to take upon them the ministerial character, and which renders divine worship an heartless formal service. Oh! for more of the spirit of grace and supplication, that we may be such worshippers as the Lord seeks, who worship him in spirit and in truth.

Again, We praise you brethren, that you keep the two positive ordinances of Christ, as delivered in his word, viz. Baptism and the Supper. The first, though much despised, yet with your Lord you esteem a becoming part of the righteous will of God, to be fulfilled as a personal act of obedience, by all his faithful and loving followers. Nor can you treat the mode, or manner of its administration with indifference, or as unbecoming, and indecent; because your Lord himself, as your pattern and example, was dipped by John in the river Jordan, and said, "Thus, so, likewise, or in like manner, it becometh us, is decent or comely for us, to fulfil all righteousness." Therefore disregard all the unbecoming contempt thrown on this solemn ordinance, and bear a faithful testimony against innovations, either as to the subject, or mode, as unbecoming indignities cast upon the Eternal Three, in whose awful name they are introduced without divine authority.

As to the Lord's Supper, what honour is conferred on you, in being admitted as guests at his table? He entertains you as friends, and beloved, with an hearty welcome. Such as love the Lord, value his presence, or regard their own comfort or edification, should not neglect this feast of the Redeemer's love, which well deserves our remembrance often; as it was stronger than death, nor could the floods of divine wrath quench it. For you his body was broken, and his blood shed; shew forth his death, who died that you might live eternally.

Further, Beloved, A regard to the discipline of God's house is necessary for your own existence as distinct visible churches. Where no
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order or rule is regarded, there will be confusion, and every evil work. That discipline and government, which your great King, and Lawgiver, has laid down in his word for your edification, and his glory, strictly attend to, nor let any rob you of the power and authority he has invested you with. The officers of a church, or of many churches, though there be a general assembly of them, are no where in the word of God called a church; nor have they lawful authority to pass any acts of rule or government over any of the churches of Christ. For as their first embodying as churches, was their own act, so the admission of members, the exclusion of the disorderly, and election of their own officers, &c. are acts belonging to the church, and not the officers, who by Christ's appointment are in the church as guides, but not over it, to pass any church act without the voice and consent of the church. In this our annual association, we disclaim usurping any such power over any of the churches of Christ. We would not infringe on your rights and privileges, but would inviolably maintain them. We have no dominion over your faith, but would be helpers of your joy. Our best advice and counsel will not be wanting when required, and our earnest prayers will be for your peace and prosperity. No interdicts, suspensions, or acts of rule and government will be issued from us, or appeals received for decision by us: as we know that every church is invested by Christ with the sole power to act for itself, according to the rule given in his word. In a spirit of love and meekness, take notice of the first appearances of neglect, and declension in the ways of God in each other, as it may be a happy means of provoking to love and good works, and of recovering feet almost gone, so as to prevent much trouble and grief to yourselves, and scandal in the world.

Finally, Brethren, as you are thus distinguishing yourselves as visible churches of Christ, formed on the very same plan as the primitive, professing the same faith, worship, ordinances and discipline: Adorn your profession by adding to your faith virtue, and to virtue knowledge, and to knowledge temperance, and to temperance patience, and to patience godliness, and to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness charity. Evidence to all, you do not thus distinguish yourselves, from a narrow, stiff, biggotted, uncharitable, or enthusiastic spirit, or the strong bias of education; but from a sincere love to the Lord Jesus, his truth and ways as revealed in his word. That what you believe and practise in religion, is matter of conscience, knowing it is the mind of Christ. A conversation becoming the gospel, is the most convincing proof that our religion is

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